

Lighting the Way to Summer



On April 30, the eve of May Day, the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, comes alive with fire for the modern-day celebration of the ancient ritual of Beltane, the Celtic holiday heralding the arrival of summer.

Beltane translates from the Gaelic as “the fires of Bel,” in reference to Belenus, the Celtic god of the sun. In ancient times, May Day welcomed back the warmth of the sun and the renewed fertility of the land. It was, and in many places still is, traditional to dance around a maypole and perform other rituals associated with fertility and abundance. But before May Day, there is Beltane, a night of roaring bonfires.

Fire is considered the ultimate purifying force. Perhaps this stems from fire’s ability to cleanse the land. After a forest fire, it is common for new growth to flourish. In olden days, on Beltane, all hearth fires were extinguished and a new *neid fire*, or “sacred fire,” was lit. Everyone in the community relit their hearths from this new fire, symbolizing the unification of the community.

Twin bonfires were also lit, and it was common for farmers to lead their livestock between the two, to cleanse and protect the animals before they were set free to pasture. Humans, too, dared to leap and run between the fires as a way to purify and heal themselves.

In Edinburgh, Beltane begins with a procession to Calton Hill. It is led by a May Queen, embodying strength, purity, and the potential for growth, and the Green Man, symbolizing the life that grows on Earth. Neither can exist without the other. The couple arrives at an outdoor stage, where performance and dancing culminate with the lighting of the bonfire. As the fire leaps higher, food and drink are passed around, and the performers and audience become one large celebratory crowd. Just as the *neid fire* of old joined the community together, so does Edinburgh’s large bonfire.

April Birthdays

- Terrence Wagner 04/02*
- David Baumann 04/05*
- Maryann Tatchio 04/12*
- Aliene Reich 04/14*
- Herbart Romage 04/18*
- Ann Brown 04/19*
- Del Myra Baumann 04/24*

A Beautiful Find



On April 8, 1820, a Greek farmer named Yorgos Kentrotas was searching for stones to rebuild a wall in a field on the island of Milos. The field was the scene of a ruined and ancient theater, and rubble littered the ground.

A French naval officer named Olivier Voutier watched Kentrotas as he heaved up a stone and curiously peered into a hole beneath. Voutier approached and saw that Kentrotas had unearthed a ruined statue—armless, cracked, and dirty, but remarkable. The farmer had discovered the *Venus de Milo*. While many historians believe the statue depicts Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty (known as Venus to the Romans), her true identity is unknown. Another guess is that she is actually Amphitrite, goddess of the sea and wife of Poseidon. Her beauty, though, is undisputed, and she is considered one of the Louvre museum’s most precious treasures.

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Evolution of Dance

April 29 is International Dancing Day, a day that will be greeted with enthusiasm by those who love to dance and perhaps with dread by those with two left feet. The date commemorates the birthday of Jean-Georges Noverre, the French dancer who is credited with creating ballet during the 18th century. While ballet might be considered the ultimate expression of modern dance, dancing has been a part of humanity since the prehistoric era.

Dancing is a pastime of every human society on Earth. Its ubiquity has led scientists to ask whether dancing is more than just an entertaining diversion. Does dancing play a role in our survival as a species? Neuroscientists have mapped the regions of the brain that are activated when we dance. Unsurprisingly, various parts of our brains associated with locomotion and coordination are involved. Perhaps more surprisingly, dance activates areas associated with emotions, memory, and social interaction. This has led evolutionary scientists to suggest that dancing has long played a vital role in social cohesion and group dynamics.

In the 1800s, sociologist Émile Durkheim coined the term “collective effervescence,” the feeling that an individual is a part of something larger than themselves. Amongst our prehistoric ancestors, dancing may very well have been a source of collective effervescence. Anthropologists assert that groups that danced well together formed lasting bonds and alliances. Dancing could even have been a show of power or influence. Group dancing also imparts psychological benefits. When we dance, our brains release endorphins. These feel-good chemicals boost our moods and create a stronger sense of social bonding. A society that dances together is quite likely to be considered stronger than one that does not dance. In this way, dancing could have been advantageous to a society’s survival. The next time you hit the dance floor, your survival may not depend on it, but you are participating in a ritual that has been performed by humans since the dawn of civilization.